

Finest 356

Chapter 356 Goryeo's Gift

"Oh my, Miss Seo, why offer such a grand gesture? I'm overwhelmed," Lin Wanrong said, grinning as he steadied Seo Jang Geum, taking the chance to brush his hand over her delicate one. Her face reddened, and she hastily withdrew her hand, not allowing him another advantage.

Lin Wanrong pondered for a moment. The Great Hua was about to engage in a fierce battle with the Turks. If Dongyin truly conquered Goryeo and then colluded with the Turks to stab Great Hua in the back, it would bring no good. The Emperor should be informed of this. How he dealt with it would be his decision. If Lin Wanrong didn't speak up, it would be a betrayal of friendship.

He couldn't, however, reveal his thoughts so openly. A hint of hesitation colored his face. "Miss Seo, you say Dongyin aims to capture Goryeo. Do you have solid evidence?"

Seo Jang Geum shook her head, "Sir, when it comes to national strategy, can one rely solely on evidence? If we wait for Dongyin to act and then Great Hua responds, it would be too late."

"So, there's no evidence?" Lin Wanrong chuckled, "Without evidence and just your word, how can I speak to the Emperor? Alas, perhaps you should return and wait. Once Dongyin begins its assault, you can face them first. If you can't handle it, then seek reinforcements."

Seo Jang Geum sensed Master Lin's intent to sit on the sidelines from his words, her face turning pale. She whispered, "Sir, if we wait for Dongyin to strike, my peace-loving people of Goryeo will face devastation, with rivers of blood flowing. Must it come to this before Great Hua is willing to lend a hand?"

Lin Wanrong smiled playfully, "Tell me, Jang Geum, in international relations, what's the most crucial thing?"

With a slight sigh, Seo Jang Geum retrieved a letter from her bosom, handing it to Lin Wanrong, "Sir, this is a letter from our King to the Emperor of Great Hua. Please, deliver it on our behalf. If Great Hua assists and saves Goryeo from this crisis, we pledge to be forever subservient, paying our respects annually, and offering tributes every year."

Such a shrewd negotiator this Seo Jang Geum was, holding onto this trump card until the very end. Had Lin Wanrong been a tad less astute, her tears would have deceived him. Taking the letter, he tucked it away, grinning, "Miss Seo, this isn't written in Goryeo's script, right? I can't understand those tadpole-like characters."

Her face lighting up, Seo Jang Geum quickly replied, "Rest assured, sir. The letter is written in both the Goryeo and Great Hua scripts. It was penned by my hand under the King's directive. There's no error. Sir, have you agreed? On behalf of all Goryeo citizens, I thank you for your great kindness."

"You don't need to represent everyone," Lin Wanrong waved dismissively, chuckling, "Apart from yourself, you represent no one. I'll keep the letter, but whether it reaches the Emperor, I'm not certain. Oh, I'm such a soft-hearted person. Doing this favor for Goryeo won't benefit me much. Miss Seo, give me a kiss as encouragement."

Seo Jang Geum's heart skipped a beat, her face glowing like blossoming peach flowers as she swiftly distanced herself. Chuckling, another lady grabbed her hand, "Miss Seo, don't be afraid. My big brother just likes to scare people. If you really kissed him, he'd probably run miles away."

Seo Jang Geum smiled bashfully, delicately reaching into her robe and producing a small box. "Sir," she whispered, "You've done so much for my Goryeo homeland. Our King wishes to express his gratitude but finds himself at a loss. This gift was specifically prepared by him for the Emperor of Great Hua before we set out. Since we were unable to meet the Emperor, and given your immense assistance, the Prince said this gift should now be yours as a token of our appreciation."

A gift intended for the Emperor? What kind of treasure could it be? Lin Wanrong took the small box, chuckling, "This is a bit much, isn't it? I'm not one to accept handouts. However, seeing your sincerity, I'll accept it. Miss Seo, what treasure does this box hold?"

Seo Jang Geum shook her head, "I'm not sure. The King said it was for the Emperor of Great Hua. Surely, the imperial physician in his palace would recognize it."

An imperial physician? What did a gift for the Emperor have to do with a physician? Could it be some sort of magical elixir? Intrigued, he gently opened the box. As the lid lifted, a subtle fragrance wafted out. Inside, there was a peculiarly shaped root: straight at the front, bulbous at the top, and seemingly split into two ball-like structures at the base. The entire root was translucent and emanated a faint scent.

Upon seeing the object, Seo Jang Geum gasped. Her face turned crimson, and she hurriedly covered her cheeks, seemingly too embarrassed to look any longer.

This thing's shape seemed oddly familiar. Lin Wanrong laughed heartily, "Miss Seo, did your King really send this? He's quite creative, isn't he? A tube and two balls... Does this resemble the cannon from Divine Machine Unit?!"

Finally overcoming her shyness, Seo Jang Geum uncovered her face, speaking softly, "As a healer, I shouldn't harbor any impure thoughts. My apologies for any inconvenience. Sir, this is an extremely precious medicinal ingredient. It is... beneficial for both you and your wife." As she reached the latter part of her sentence, her voice grew softer, and her face flushed even more, though she steadfastly kept her gaze up.

"Beneficial for both me and my wife?" Lin Wanrong said, glancing questioningly at Qiaoqiao. Waving the box in front of his wife, Qiaoqiao shyly looked down and muttered, "Big brother, you're terrible! Put it away now!"

"Miss Seo, please clarify. With you being so vague, what if I accidentally consume it—"

"You mustn't misuse it," Seo Jang Geum interjected anxiously. "Sir, this medicine is potent. A piece the size of a fingernail is enough to ensure marital harmony for the night. An overdose could have unforeseen consequences."

Upon hearing "marital harmony," it dawned on Lord Lin: it was a 'Viagra.' Yi Seung-Jae, that rascal, wasn't decent at all! Lord Lin himself prided on his genuine prowess, not on medicinal enhancement.

"Seo Jang Geum, what exactly do you mean by 'marital harmony'? I truly don't understand. Can you elaborate? Qiaoqiao, dear, come and listen too. Let's find out about this 'harmony' together." Lord Lin said with a feigned earnestness, his eyes brimming with playful curiosity.

Qiaoqiao, realizing the nature of the item, blushed a deep red, quickly hiding behind her big brother, too embarrassed to look up.

Seo Jang Geum was indeed a principled healer. Despite her shyness, she tried to explain, "Sir, this is known as Wanyang Ginseng, a magical product unique to the sacred mountain of my homeland, Goryeo. There's a theory in traditional medicine that says 'like cures like.' In essence, it means that any medicine that resembles a particular organ in shape, can potentially be beneficial to that organ. For instance, broad beans, which resemble kidneys, are thought to nourish and strengthen them."

Master Lin slapped his forehead, a sudden realization dawning on him. "I see, so because it looks like this, it can be used to bolster... well, you know. That part that looks like this. Is that correct, Miss Seo?"

Seo Jang Geum bit her lip lightly, speaking softly, "Nature is full of mysteries and unpredictability. This 'Wanyang Ginseng' is fiery hot, embodying pure yang, yet it grows in the frigid, yin-dominated sacred mountain, absorbing the essence of heaven and earth. It's specifically beneficial for men's vitality. Regular Wanyang Ginseng is already very potent, and considering the size of this one, who knows how many years it has grown beneath the snow. Its medicinal power must be immense and wild, too much for most people to handle. You must be careful not to consume too much, otherwise —"

"Otherwise, what would happen?" Master Lin asked, curiosity making his eyes wide.

Seo Jang Geum's face flushed with embarrassment, yet she refused to lower her gaze. Unable to meet his eyes, she turned to look out the window, murmuring, "Otherwise... your wives might not be able to cope."

Master Lin was ecstatic inside, this was precisely the effect he desired. No wonder the Goryeo King had chosen to send this to the Emperor. He tucked the small box into his robe, sighing, "The Prince shouldn't have sent this. I was already worried about my virility being too potent. With this, it's like adding fuel to the fire. I might live to be a hundred, and I still might not need this. Miss Seo, you're a healer, do you have any solution for my 'excessive fire'?"

Seo Jang Geum smiled faintly, "You may have liver fire rising sir. You need to calm your mind, restrain your desires, and cultivate your spirit—"

Qiaoqiao interrupted with a giggle, teasingly poking Master Lin's waist. Master Lin laughed awkwardly, "Miss Seo, you are very skilled at diagnosing. Never mind, forget what I said."

After conversing with Seo Jang Geum for a while, asking detailed questions about the function and medicinal properties of Wanyang Ginseng, and seeking further consultation about his overbearing virility—so much so that he confessed how many times he was capable in one night—the conversation left Miss Seo red-faced and too embarrassed to look up for a long time.

As he bid farewell to Seo Jang Geum, Master Lin still seemed unsatisfied. Holding her hand, he said, "Jang Geum, would you be willing to come regularly and give me and Qiaoqiao medical lessons? I still have many questions about male physiology." Seo Jang Geum fled as though on wings, daring not to look back.

After this playful banter with Seo Jang Geum, Master Lin's spirits were significantly lifted. However, he couldn't find Eldest Miss or Madam Xiao anywhere. Puzzled, he turned to Qiaoqiao and asked, "Little darling, where are Eldest Miss and Madam Xiao?"

Qiaoqiao smiled, "Eldest Miss and Madam Xiao went to Jinghua Academy early this morning."

Master Lin suddenly understood. Of course, now that Madam Xiao was in the capital, she would want to see Yushuang. Speaking of which, he hadn't seen that little girl for several days. He wondered if she was settling in well?

Just as he was thinking of Yushuang, Qiaoqiao tugged at his sleeve, "Big brother, have you told Eldest Miss that we are planning to move out?"

"No!" Lin Wanrong exclaimed, "What happened?!"

Qiaoqiao let out a soft sigh, "Big brother, when you have a moment, please talk to her—last night, the Eldest Miss cried."

Chapter 357 The Emperor is in Trouble

Cried? Lin Wanrong pondered for a moment and then understood. The Eldest Miss was the type who acted tough but was soft-hearted. She must have overheard the Madam saying that Qiaoqiao was beginning to pack up the house and assumed they would soon move out. That must be why she was so upset. He knew her personality all too well. Outwardly, she might appear indifferent, but deep down, she was probably very anxious.

"Yesterday, after I shopped with Sister Xu, I saw the Eldest Miss hiding from us and crying secretly in her chamber," Qiaoqiao said somberly. "Brother, the Eldest Miss is truly pitiable. She and the Madam have been so good to you. Can we not part ways with them, please?"

"Silly girl, who said we were parting?" Lin Wanrong pulled her into an embrace, the image of the Eldest Miss's determined yet gentle demeanor surfacing in his mind. He sighed softly, "Didn't I tell you yesterday? We, along with the Madam and Eldest Miss, will always be one family and will never be separated. Once she returns, I'll tell her that we should all move into the big house together. It'll be warm and lively; how wonderful would that be?"

Qiaoqiao obediently nodded, looking up with a seductive smile and said sweetly, "Big brother, you're so kind."

The two went inside. Lin Wanrong recalled the "Nose-piercing Grass" he had acquired from the Turkic people and took out a small bag, which was as precious to Ashile as life itself. He poured the long, thin tobacco leaves onto the table and examined them closely. This crude tobacco had been processed roughly; the Turkic people simply burned it in pots to inhale. But in Lin Wanrong's hands, it was a different story. Being a cunning merchant, he wouldn't miss such a lucrative opportunity.

He asked Qiaoqiao to bring a small blade and grindstone. He finely shredded the tobacco, then asked her for a thin piece of paper, and wrapped the tobacco in it, rolling it slowly. Qiaoqiao's skillful hands were renowned. Following her brother's instructions, she rolled the tobacco perfectly, handing it over to Lin Wanrong. The cigarette was straight and slender, somewhat resembling the cigarettes from his previous world.

Elated, Lin Wanrong lit the cigarette, and a mild tobacco scent filled his nostrils. Though it was bitter and dry compared to the superior tobacco of his world, having a cigarette to smoke in this era was a treat. This was innovation; a veritable goldmine.

"Big brother, what's this?" Qiaoqiao asked, covering her nose, finding the tobacco scent a bit overwhelming.

Lin Wanrong chuckled, "This is called tobacco. It's a very profitable commodity. I plan to use it to extract money from the foreigners, hehe."

Qiaoqiao didn't understand what he was talking about, but seeing her brother in high spirits, she simply smiled and said nothing.

Remembering what Lu Dongzan had mentioned, that the tobacco's growing area was near the southern foothills of the Altai Mountains, within the Turkic territory, Lin Wanrong felt indignant. Damn it, why did such a valuable plant grow in Turkic territory? Such a waste! He needed to take it! The nomads invaded Great Hua for its land, and if Great Hua were to resist them, it shouldn't stop at simply driving them out. Plunder, destroy, decapitate, and kill without mercy.

He chuckled, grabbing Qiaoqiao's hand. "Qiaoqiao, in a while, I'll have to make a long journey. You and the Eldest Miss, stay in the capital and don't be scared. Once I finish my business, I'll be back."

Qiaoqiao, taken aback, asked, "Big brother, where are you going?!"

"I'm going to... 'retrieve', yes, to fetch something," Lin Wanrong stated with seriousness. "With this item, our Great Hua will be able to trade with other nations. They will all be engulfed in the clouds and mists, enjoying it... such a magnificent dream."

Qiaoqiao looked downcast for a moment. Looking up with a tender expression, she said, "Big brother, is the place you're heading to far away? I want to go with you."

"You can't," Lin Wanrong replied, unsure of how to explain. Would he say that he's heading to the battlefield to fight the Turks? Even he wouldn't believe that. All he desired was to capture the tobacco land. As to who would do the capturing, that wasn't his concern. With tens of thousands of soldiers and old Li Tai in the lead, no danger would befall him. Nevertheless, the safest option would be to have an army commander with layers of protection. If worst came to worst, he could always run, sparing his life.

"Just stay in the capital and manage our restaurant. I am undertaking a covert operation, and there's no danger involved. Don't worry about me," Lin Wanrong said, gently caressing Qiaoqiao's hair, trying to reassure her.

Knowing her brother's determination and how once he set his mind to something it was hard to sway him, she sighed gently. "Then, big brother, return soon. The Eldest Miss, Sister Xu, and I will be waiting for you."

"Of course, I too will miss you all, especially my sweet little Qiaoqiao," Lin Wanrong cooed, his voice dripping with honey. Qiaoqiao blushed at his words but was also filled with joy, leaning tightly against him, lost for words.

Having been with Lin Wanrong for the longest time, Qiaoqiao had always been kind and caring towards him. She had evolved from a naive young girl into a charming young woman, with a fuller and more graceful figure. Every smile, every frown was both gentle and enticing, and Lin Wanrong cherished her deeply.

He softly caressed her behind, whispering in her ear, "Sweetheart, let's try the wonderful gift Seo Jang Geum gave me today. How about it? Oh, my poor little thing will suffer."

Qiaoqiao's ears reddened, and she leaned weakly into him, murmuring, "Big brother, not now... it's still daytime."

"Ever heard of 'daylight dalliance'?" Lin Wanrong teased, his hands gently massaging her behind. As he lifted her up, intending to carry her to the inner room...

"Cough, cough," a soft coughing sound interrupted from behind. Startled, Qiaoqiao hid behind him, her face flushed. Turning around, Lin Wanrong saw Madam Xiao standing there, her face bearing an amused, teasing smile.

"Ah, Madam, you've returned? Qiaoqiao and I were just playing a game. Would you like to join us?" Lin Wanrong asked with a straight face, genuine in tone. Yet internally, he was riddled with regret. How could he have been so careless as to forget to close the door, leaving himself caught in such a situation?

Madam Xiao shook her head with a light chuckle, pretending not to have heard his words. She cast him a glance and remarked, "Lin San, yesterday a beautiful young lady came looking for you. She waited the entire night. Did you happen to meet her?"

"A beautiful young lady?" Lin Wanrong furrowed his brows in confusion. "Where? Is she as beautiful as you, Madam?"

Madam Xiao replied with a soft laugh, "Enough with the sweet talk. Has the young lady left? She's not only stunning, but she also waited for you without eating or drinking. Such devotion is truly admirable."

Lin Wanrong laughed heartily, "Madam, you've misunderstood. There's nothing between us. She is a maidservant from the Goryeo royal family, entrusted me with a task. Our relationship is purely platonic, absolutely nothing inappropriate. Qiaoqiao can vouch for that."

Caught in the act by Madam Xiao earlier, Qiaoqiao felt a profound sense of embarrassment. Hearing Lin Wanrong mention her, she instinctively shook her head, saying, "No, no, we didn't do anything—"

Madam Xiao couldn't help but smile, observing their intimate behavior. Qiaoqiao had certainly chosen the right man. But Lin San was a notorious womanizer, involved with countless women. And to think, her own two daughters had relations with him too! How could this situation possibly be good? As these thoughts swirled, her brow subtly furrowed.

"Why haven't I seen the Eldest Miss?" Lin Wanrong inquired curiously.

"She's at the Jinghua Academy, chatting with Yushuang," Madam Xiao replied, casting him another glance. "Lin San, Yushuang asked me to convey a message to you."

"Yushuang said something?" Lin Wanrong exclaimed with joy. "I haven't seen her in days. I've been missing her."

"Really?" Madam Xiao obviously didn't buy his words and snorted coldly, "I see you busy every day, either courting a position as an imperial son-in-law or mingling with Goryeo maidservants. When do you ever find the time to think of her? Yushuang mentioned that if you don't visit her soon, she's going to bring General Zhenyuan from Jinling—"

Sweat broke out all over Lin Wanrong. That little miss! She had explicitly instructed, upon joining the academy, that she would not return until her studies were complete, and asked him not to disturb her, fearing it would distract her. And now, even though he had abided by her words, she was complaining about him.

"Lin San, have you taken note?" Madam Xiao, seeing his flustered appearance, felt even more irritated. He treated Qiaoqiao as if she were a treasured gem, so why was he neglecting Yushuang?

"I've taken note," Lin Wanrong replied with a sheepish grin. "I had intended to visit her earlier, but Yushuang had instructed me to not disturb her so she could focus on her studies. So, I've been following her guidance all this while."

"Do you do whatever she tells you to? Why don't I ever see you being so obedient in front of me? Do I need to teach you how to understand a woman's heart?" Madam expressed in dissatisfaction.

It was Madam who had initially prevented him from getting involved with the Second Miss, and now, she was the one pushing them together. Lin Wanrong found himself caught between laughter and tears, unable to react. He simply nodded in agreement. In front of the deeply protective Madam Xiao, regardless of his grievances, he had no choice but to bear them silently.

"Master Lin, Master Lin!" Suddenly, an anxious voice echoed from outside the door. Xu Wei rushed in hurriedly. Without even greeting those present, he grabbed Lin Wanrong's arm, pulling him towards the exit.

Taken aback, Lin Wanrong quickly asked, "Mr. Xu, what's going on? I was in the middle of a conversation with Madam."

"What are you still discussing?" Xu Wei's face was etched with urgency. After a swift glance around the room, he whispered cautiously into Lin Wanrong's ear, "The Emperor... The Emperor has met with trouble."

Chapter 358 Dead?

"Something's wrong?" Lin Wanrong paused momentarily, then blurted out, "Has the Emperor passed away?!"

Xu Wei was so exasperated that he almost fainted. Couldn't this youngster utter something pleasant? How dare he speak so carelessly? Shaking his head with a bitter smile, he said, "Young Master Lin, you can't say things like that recklessly. Such words could lead to decapitation. Don't ask any more, just come with me." As the two men stepped out, a carriage awaited outside. Without uttering a word, Xu Wei solemnly ushered him into it. One could easily tell that something serious had happened.

If the Emperor had met with misfortune, why would Old Xu be so eager to involve him? Despite asking several times, Xu Wei remained gravely silent, shaking his head without answering. The carriage sped hastily, heading out of the city. Lin Wanrong recalled Xu Wei mentioning earlier in the day that the elderly Emperor had gone to Grand Prime Minister Temple to offer incense. Could the incident have occurred there? The old Emperor couldn't be dead; he was Xian'er's father and his future father-in-law. If he were to die and Prince Cheng took the throne, he would be doomed.

Lost in his turbulent thoughts, the carriage soon reached the foot of the hill where Grand Prime Minister Temple was located. Today, the temple was different than usual. Soldiers were everywhere; every few steps there was a guard or a sentry. All were armored, their weapons shining clearly, emitting a forbidding aura. As they drew closer to the temple entrance, security became even tighter, with countless soldiers standing solemnly, eyeing everyone warily.

Anxious, Lin Wanrong tugged on Xu Wei's sleeve, "Master Xu, what exactly happened to the Emperor? Please, tell me. The situation looks dire."

Glancing outside and noticing their proximity to the temple, Xu Wei spoke with unparalleled gravity, "Young Master Lin, you must promise me that whatever you witness today won't be revealed. Otherwise, not only are our lives at risk, but our great nation might also plunge into chaos."

Lin Wanrong thought sarcastically, 'Reveal what? I haven't seen anything yet.' Seeing Xu Wei's unprecedented solemnity, he nodded, "Master Xu, don't you trust me? I'm known for my integrity. I promise not to divulge anything."

Xu Wei's face turned pale, a weariness evident in his eyes. Heaving a sigh, he murmured, "Young Master Lin, the Emperor... he was assassinated."

Assassinated?! Lin Wanrong grabbed Xu Wei urgently, "How is that possible? Just a few days ago, His Majesty told me he was well-protected and I shouldn't worry. How could he be assassinated today? Old Xu, you better not be deceiving me."

With a bitter smile, Xu Wei replied, "In times like these, do you think I'd dare jest? This morning, while the Emperor was offering incense in Grand Prime Minister Temple, he was ambushed by more than ten assassins. They hid inside a golden Buddha statue. As the Emperor bowed in reverence and the guards were momentarily lax, they emerged, attacking... The Emperor... he..." Xu Wei choked, tears shimmering in his eyes, unable to continue.

"The Emperor... Is he... dead?!" Lin Wanrong murmured in disbelief, a cold chill running through his body. 'The old Emperor is dead? How could he just die like that? Just yesterday, he was simultaneously threatening and advising me, and now he's gone? I haven't even officially become his son-in-law. This is utterly unjust.'

Xu Wei saw Lin Wanrong's stunned expression and quickly patted him on the shoulder. "Stay calm, little brother Lin. The situation is not yet clear. I don't even know whether the Emperor is alive or dead."

Hearing this, Lin Wanrong quickly looked up, "Master Xu, are you toying with me? You were the one who summoned me, and now you don't even know if the Emperor is alive or dead? Those assassins burst out from the belly of the Buddha statue, and the Emperor had only a few guards around him. Doesn't that spell doom?"

"I'm not sure about the specifics," Xu Wei responded. "Li Tai and I were both acting on orders from Eunuch Gao. While Li Tai was gathering troops and locking down the capital, I was sent to fetch you. All the imperial doctors from the palace have been summoned. Judging by Eunuch Gao's expression, the Emperor's condition seems..." Xu Wei paused, not finishing his sentence, but the implication was clear.

Lin Wanrong clenched his fists tightly, an indescribable feeling swelling in his heart. His interactions with the old Emperor had been short-lived. The Emperor had tried various methods to

manipulate him: threats, temptations, intimidation, deceit... Yet, strangely, Lin Wanrong couldn't harbor any resentment toward him. Many saw the elderly Emperor as weak and ineffective, especially when compared to the charismatic Prince Cheng. However, appearances were deceiving. When it came to endurance and determination, even ten Prince Chengs couldn't match the old Emperor. The true titan had been proven two decades ago; some just failed to recognize it.

As Lin Wanrong was lost in thought, an elderly general approached, his white hair standing out against his splendid armor and the treasured sword at his waist. It was the leading general, Li Tai.

"General, how are things?" Xu Wei hurriedly asked with palpable anxiety as he approached.

Li Tai, with a solemn expression, shook his head, "All the imperial doctors are inside, and no outsiders are allowed in. We've received no word. I don't know the Emperor's condition."

Xu Wei glanced at Lin Wanrong. If outsiders were not permitted, why was Master Lin summoned?

Seeing the questioning look, Lin Wanrong unexpectedly spoke up with a grave face, "General Li, what's the situation in the capital? Have there been any unusual movements?"

"After receiving the news, I immediately ordered the city gates to be sealed — allowing entry but not exit. The news is currently contained, and there haven't been any unusual activities in the capital. Lin San, what are you thinking? Speak up!" Li Tai commanded in a deep voice. The Li family had a long-standing military lineage, known for their loyalty and patriotism. Their reputation was esteemed, and as long as Li Tai was in command, Lin Wanrong was confident there would be no major chaos in the city.

Lin Wanrong paced a little before speaking, "Currently, the envoys from the Turkic Khaganate, Dongyin, and Goryeo are all in the capital. With various powers at play and the sudden assassination attempt on the Emperor, is there a connection?"

Both Xu Wei and Li Tai were taken aback by his words. Lin Wanrong's point was indeed valid. The Turkic Khaganate was on the brink of war with their Empire, and Dongyin had always coveted their land. Even Goryeo, which used to be relatively weaker, had started to act defiantly in recent years. If these countries banded together to target their Empire and sent assassins for the Emperor, it wasn't an unlikely scenario.

"I'll send men to keep an eye on them right away," said Li Tai, about to leave, but Lin Wanrong called out, "General Li, please wait a moment."

Li Tai halted in his steps and glanced over at Lin Wanrong, who pondered for a moment before saying, "It's still uncertain whether they're the culprits. But these assassins, having dared to act, surely aren't ordinary individuals. Your men, General, are warriors on the battlefield, but for this sort of espionage, I fear they might be ill-suited. In my opinion, it's better to set a trap and wait for them to expose themselves."

"Set a trap and wait?" Xu Wei asked, puzzled. "What kind of strategy is that?"

"Think about it, Mr. Xu," Lin Wanrong said gravely. "You and General Li are the Emperor's closest confidants. If even you two don't know whether the Emperor lives or dies, how would outsiders?"

"If neither General Li nor I know, then outsiders certainly wouldn't," Xu Wei nodded. "What are you suggesting, little brother Lin?"

"If you two appear unaffected and continue your daily routines, the real culprits, driven by anxiety, will inevitably expose themselves."

Xu Wei and Li Tai exchanged glances. Master Lin's logic was sound. Instead of scouring the vast city for the assassins, it made more sense to have them reveal themselves.

"So, what should we do now?" General Li Tai asked. "I've shut down the city gates, but if it goes on for too long, it might lead to rumors, which would be detrimental."

Lin Wanrong gave a slight smile. "General Li, if you trust my words, then withdraw the sentries from the city gates. The assassins, being prepared, will have their own escape routes. Closing the gates not only doesn't help, but it might cause unnecessary panic. I suggest retaining some troops around the Grand Prime Minister Temple and redeploying the rest. Furthermore, secretly increase the guard around the Emperor's quarters to ensure his safety. As for the rest, continue as usual. General, continue with your military drills, and Mr. Xu, attend to your state affairs. Proceed as if this incident never occurred."

Xu Wei clapped his hands. "Excellent! This strategy is akin to releasing the enemy intentionally to capture them later. What do you think, General?"

Li Tai nodded, "Very well, let's proceed this way. Master Lin, I'll leave thousands of my men stationed in the rear mountain under your command. Here's the seal."

Handing over a small seal, Li Tai waited for Master Lin's response. As Master Lin tried to decline the offer, Li Tai fixed him with a stern gaze. "A true man should be eager for battles and thirsty for the challenges of the field. With such a meek disposition, how can you take on such a significant responsibility?"

This old man truly possesses the spirit of a tiger! Lin Wanrong gave a resigned smile as he took the seal from Li Tai. Seeing the subtle smile on Li Tai's face, he watched as the general strode away, his departure as imposing as a gusty wind.

Xu Wei nodded gravely. "Little brother Lin," he said seriously, "The general truly values you. In the days to come, when we face the northern invaders, I hope you can help bear the burdens of our great nation."

"Let's not talk about sharing burdens right now," Lin Wanrong replied with a wry smile. "We should focus on the immediate problem at hand. With the Emperor's fate still unknown, are we just to wait here indefinitely?"

Xu Wei waved his hand, as if to say he was equally at a loss. Looking at the older man's graying hair fluttering in the wind, Lin Wanrong couldn't help but chuckle. Fortunately, they had stalwarts like Xu Wei and Li Tai to hold up the heavens of their great land. If everyone were as lazy and cunning as he was, the nation would be doomed.

"Master Lin, Master Lin!" A shrill and urgent voice interrupted his thoughts. "The Emperor requests your presence!"

Chapter 359 Do You Understand?

"What did you say, Eunuch Gao?" Master Lin exclaimed in surprise and joy, "The Emperor is calling for me?"

Xu Wei, however, was a savvy man. Seeing someone who finally seemed to be in the know, he hurriedly grabbed Gao Ping, "Eunuch Gao, what is the situation inside? Is the Emperor all right?"

Eunuch Gao shook his head and sighed, "Master Xu, don't put me in a tough spot. You're no outsider. If I could tell you, would I dare to hide it from you?" Seeing the anxiety on Gao Ping's

face, Xu Wei felt a chill in his heart, a foreboding feeling arose. He let go of Gao Ping's sleeve, nodded silently, accepting the message.

The Emperor had suffered an assassination attempt in Grand Prime Minister Temple and was currently resting in the largest chamber there. Lin Wanrong followed Gao Ping into the room. The first thing that met his eyes were dozens of imperial physicians with medicine boxes on their backs, all kneeling on the ground. They were visibly terrified, their faces as white as paper. When they saw Lin Wanrong come in, not a single one of them dared to lift their heads to look at him, let alone speak.

Gao Ping turned his head and hushed Lin Wanrong, signaling for him to be silent. He then tiptoed forward, fearful of disturbing those inside with any excessive movement.

Inside was a smaller Zen room. The door was slightly ajar, silence prevailing. As Gao Ping and Lin Wanrong approached, they heard a vigilant voice from inside, "Who is there?" Hearing this, Lin Wanrong was stunned. Why did this voice sound so familiar? But he couldn't recall where he had heard it before.

Gao Ping softly and respectfully said, "Reporting to Supervisor Wei, the Emperor asked this servant to fetch Master Lin, and he has been waiting outside."

"Let Lin San come in," a weak voice sounded, as if all strength had been drained. If not for the absolute silence of the room, Lin Wanrong would hardly hear him. He recognized this voice. The day before, in his newly bestowed mansion, this voice was both threatening and intimidating, an impression he could never forget.

A wave of emotion surged in his heart. He quickly pushed open the door and walked in. Inside the room was a pure white curtain hanging down. It was hooked up on both sides with silver hooks. Behind the curtain, on a large couch, lay a figure. Upon a closer look, he saw a pale face, lips devoid of color, breathing heavily, and coughing intermittently. If not for the occasional gleam in his eyes, Lin Wanrong wouldn't have recognized this as the grand Emperor of Great Hua who had been laughing and talking in front of him just yesterday.

"Your Majesty, what, what happened to you?!" Lin Wanrong exclaimed in horror, and rushed forward. Gao Ping wanted to stop him but was not fast enough. He could only shake his head and sigh lightly. How could Master Lin, acting as if he just climbed out from under the ground, ignore the etiquette of court?

The old Emperor opened his eyes, seeing him, his lips twitched a few times, and a faint smile appeared in his eyes. His voice was extremely weak, "Lin San, you're here, cough, cough——"

After saying a sentence, he began to cough incessantly, his forehead veins bulging out. His painful and uncomfortable appearance could not have been feigned.

Lin Wanrong clenched his fist, his voice filled with anger, "Who did this, who did this?!"

The old Emperor drew several sharp breaths, his eyes briefly closing, then slowly opened again. With calmness in his voice, he said, "Lin San, one must never be impetuous or anxious in life. I'll teach you this lesson one more time. Remember it well, as there may not be another opportunity."

Seeing the old man, still educating him despite his severe illness, Lin Wanrong felt both amusement and a touch of emotion. He quickly said, "Old Man, I've been quite busy lately and rather forgetful. When you're feeling better, you can teach me again."

The Emperor glanced at him, sighed and said, "Throughout my life, I've survived countless assassination attempts, but I've never been worried. This time, however, I lack all confidence. I'm old. I've finally grown old." He took a slight breath, his voice barely audible, filled with a mix of regret and reflection, and ultimately a sigh.

Lin Wanrong quickly shook his head. "Old Man, you mustn't lose heart. There are so many imperial physicians outside. They will definitely have a solution."

"Lin San, do you know how I ascended to this position?" The Emperor seemed to ignore his words, his eyes flashing a reminiscing smile.

"I don't know, but considering your ability, Old Man, it must be a tale worth both songs and tears," Lin Wanrong responded with a grin.

"Worth both songs and tears?" The old Emperor's eyes sparkled. "Indeed. Years ago, Prince Cheng was wise and astute, favored deeply by the late Emperor. As for me, in terms of talent and cunning, I was far from his equal. Everyone thought the late Emperor would choose him as the heir."

"If I were your father, Old Man, I wouldn't choose Prince Cheng," Lin Wanrong disdainfully said, "There's an old saying, 'Judge a tree by its roots and a man by his heart.' Prince Cheng is like a lotus root with many twists—too cunning and deceptive."

The Emperor chuckled, taking several labored breaths. "You're right. His cunning was both his strength and downfall."

"What do you mean?" Lin Wanrong asked, confused. "Is being too cunning a bad thing? Am I not in great danger then?"

The Emperor laughed heartily, then fell into a fit of severe coughing. Eunuch Gao quickly handed over a white silk handkerchief. The Emperor covered his mouth to cough, staining the handkerchief with a mouthful of fresh blood. Gao Ping turned deathly pale, hands trembling as he took back the handkerchief. The Emperor shot him a cold glance. Gao Ping shivered and quickly retreated.

The old Emperor snorted, turned to Lin Wanrong, and said with a smile, "You're not cunning, you're crafty. Prince Cheng's downfall was his overthinking. He was highly favored by the late Emperor, who put him in charge of the Ministry of Personnel. Half of the officials in the country were appointed by him. What tremendous power he had! I, on the other hand, was stuck in the Ministry of Revenue, working thanklessly. Despite all the hard work, nobody knew about it. All Prince Cheng needed to do was put in a little effort, and considering the late Emperor's fondness for him, he would have been the ruler. But his cleverness became his undoing. In his quest to secure his position, he aligned himself with influential courtiers and gathered followers from all over the country. Everyone praised him as the 'Virtuous Prince Cheng,' and he enjoyed boundless respect and admiration. His trivial cunningness, however, sowed the seeds of great disaster. The late Emperor detested those who formed private cliques the most. Seeing him surrounded by such a group, he advised him several times, but to no avail. It greatly disappointed the late Emperor."

The old Emperor's spirits seemed to rally as he delved into the past, his coughing spells ceasing. Listening to the tales of a reigning monarch's struggle for power, Lin Wanrong found himself engrossed, even though he didn't understand why the Emperor would share such intimate details with him.

"When Father grew disillusioned with Prince Cheng, he slowly began to pay attention to me," the Emperor continued. "I had just met Miss Guo then. Despite our age difference, I admired her greatly. However, her father, Sir Guo, was the head scholar at the Pavilion of the Source of Literature at the time. To avoid the taint of favoritism, under the advice of Xu Wei and Li Tai, I had to reluctantly set aside my feelings for Miss Guo and devote myself fully to serving my father."

It dawned on Lin Wanrong that these complexities explained the Emperor's lingering attachment to Madam Xiao; what one never attains is always most desirable. Xu Wei wasn't particularly admirable either, having abandoned Su Qinglian for fame and fortune in his younger days, only to seek a late-life romance in his twilight years. Lin Wanrong couldn't help but disdain him.

"I won't elaborate further on what happened afterward," the Emperor said, his face flashing with pain. "When Father was gravely ill and dying, he stayed in the Grand Prime Minister Temple. I

served him faithfully by his sickbed, while Prince Cheng was busy colluding with his allies, preparing for a final strike. In his anger, Father left a decree on his deathbed, passing the throne to me. But familial bonds persisted; he made me swear by his deathbed that as long as Prince Cheng was alive, I could not lay a hand on him."

A lengthy 'Oh' escaped Master Lin, as he realized why the Emperor was manipulating him to deal with Prince Cheng. He'd made a binding vow.

"Yet, just after Father was interred, I was attacked. If not for a loyal eunuch sacrificing himself, I would have become nothing more than a pile of bones." The Emperor's eyes flashed with pain, his words squeezed out between clenched teeth. "That is a disgrace that I cannot erase in my lifetime. Disgrace!"

Master Lin thought, given their struggle for the throne, assassination attempts seemed quite normal. What was there to be ashamed about? But seeing the Emperor's anguished expression, Master Lin sensed there was more to it than just an assassination attempt. He swallowed his words.

"Lin San, would you be willing to help me erase this disgrace?" the Emperor asked, his gaze heavy upon Master Lin.

"Well, you know, Prince Cheng is powerful and highly ranked, while I'm just a minor official. How can I stand a chance against him? Can't you give me some other task?" Lin Wanrong said, a worried look on his face.

"High rank and power?" the old Emperor chuckled. "Lin San, if I were to grant you the ultimate power and status under the heavens, would you be able to handle him?"

'Ultimate power and status under the heavens? As long as you're here, I can never attain that.' Lin Wanrong shook his head helplessly, saying, "Your Majesty, stop joking. It's making me think all kinds of crazy thoughts."

"Fool!" The Emperor grunted in annoyance. "Do you remember the title I wrote for you?"

"Of course, I remember. Your handwriting is elegant, as good as mine." Lin Wanrong chuckled.

"Read it out loud," the Emperor ordered in a deep voice.

"The First Talent Under Heaven! I remember it," Lin Wanrong replied, laughing.

"Listen closely to the words I wrote for you," the Emperor grunted, raising his voice, "The First Talent Under Heaven! The First Talent Under Heaven!! Do you understand?!"

Chapter 360 Paying a Visit

"What, what, what does this mean?" Lin Wanrong stuttered, his heart pounding in his chest, his face flushed red. He felt as if he had lost control of himself. The Emperor had gone mad!

"Whatever you're thinking, that's what it means," the old Emperor coughed lightly, his pale face tinged with a faint blush. He spoke in a deep voice, "Gao Ping, bring the portrait!"

The Eunuch Gao, who had been waiting outside the door, hurried in, holding a scroll in both hands. He respectfully handed it to Lin Wanrong, then hastily retreated. Lin Wanrong held the scroll in his hands, full of questions. The old man hadn't made his intentions clear yet, why bring up a portrait?

"Open it and take a look," the Old Emperor commanded, covering his mouth and nose as he coughed lightly. He looked at Lin Wanrong before speaking.

"What is this?" Lin Wanrong asked cautiously. The Emperor was acting oddly today; it was best to ask before proceeding.

"If I tell you to open it, you open it. Stop dawdling," the Emperor huffed, a sharp gleam in his eyes as he spoke impatiently.

Trying to appease himself by considering the Emperor's illness, Lin Wanrong slowly unrolled the scroll, revealing the portrait of a beautiful woman. He gasped in surprise, "Xian'er?!"

The Emperor slightly closed his eyes, "Look closer, who is she really?!" Lin Wanrong scrutinized the woman in the portrait. She greatly resembled Xian'er, even her demeanor was similar, but she appeared older. Recalling the painting he had seen at Xian'er's home in Hangzhou's Longhong Village, he had a sudden realization, "It's not Xian'er, it's her mother, it's Consort Qin!"

The Emperor nodded slightly, sighed, and said, "You're correct. It is Consort Qin. In my life, even though I am a revered Emperor, Heaven has been harsh with me, granting me two sons and three daughters. The princes were tragically killed at a young age, and among the princesses, Nishang suffered the most hardships—"

'So Princess Nishang is Xian'er.' Lin Wanrong thought with disdain about how the Emperor had once used Consort Qin as a human shield against an assassin. But from the perspective of the Emperor of Great Hua, the lives of everyone else could be sacrificed, only he must survive. Unsure of what to say, Lin Wanrong let out a faint sigh.

"Things are not as you imagine." The Emperor seemed to see through his thoughts, a hint of anger on his face, "There are people intentionally defaming me, trying to turn me into a heartless, cruel sovereign. I am the Emperor of Great Hua, who wouldn't blink in the face of a ten-thousand-strong army. Consort Qin gave birth to Princess Nishang, she is my family. Would I use her to block a sword?"

Watching the Emperor's beard tremble with rage, Lin Wanrong was confused. The Emperor didn't seem to be lying. Could Xian'er have been mistaken? That wasn't right either; Xian'er had said she saw it with her own eyes. Being the child of an Emperor would have been an honor, had there not been a deep-seated hatred, Xian'er would have never left with Sister An.

"Old man, the more you say, the more confused I become." Lin Wanrong forced a bitter smile. "Both you and Xian'er seem to be telling the truth. I simply can't distinguish who's right. Did Consort Qin really die for you?"

"Indeed, Consort Qin died for me, but she chose to do so of her own accord." The Emperor, his face flushed crimson from a fit of violent coughing, declared with clear eyes, "On the day when the former Emperor passed and Prince Cheng rebelled, I was seriously injured from an assassination attempt. Several years after my ascension, my interest in the imperial consorts started to fade. Nishang was my youngest daughter at that time, just a few years old, as delicate and beautiful as a porcelain doll. I may not have had interest in the beauties of the harem, but I loved my two youngest daughters beyond measure."

The two youngest daughters, one was Xian'er, who was the other? As Lin Wanrong was about to voice his confusion, the old Emperor sternly commanded, "Do not interrupt, let me finish." He paused, steadied his breath, then continued, "Because of Nishang, I often spent time with Consort Qin. Initially, she was delighted, thinking I held her in special favor. But as time passed, she realized I no longer showed her favor, and resentment grew in her heart. Coupled with the constant strife and intrigue amongst the concubines, she, a delicate woman raised in the water towns of Jiangnan, was ill-equipped to navigate such treacherous waters. Her mental state began to deteriorate."

Lin Wanrong nodded in understanding. This was plausible. The mother of Xian'er, born and raised by the lake in Jiangnan, would naturally possess a temperament as gentle as water. The scheming nature of the court would have been alien to her. It was entirely possible that the oppressive atmosphere had led her into a state of depression.

"That day, the three of us were enjoying the garden when assassins suddenly attacked. In the chaos, Consort Qin used her own body to shield me. By the time Nishang turned around, all she saw was the assassin's blade piercing through her mother's body." The Emperor's eyes welled with unshed tears, his expression solemn. He seemed to be lost in the memory of that day.

"Poor girl," Lin Wanrong murmured. He tried to imagine a naive and innocent young girl witnessing her mother's brutal demise in her father's arms. No wonder Xian'er was so different from her mother. Who could endure such trauma and still retain their original innocence and purity? His understanding of Xian'er's willfulness deepened, and he felt an even greater urge to protect and cherish her.

"You probably know the rest. Consort Qin died to save me, and Nishang disappeared that very night. In the span of a single day, I lost two more loved ones. I mobilized every resource to find Princess Nishang, but all in vain. It wasn't until years later, when the White Lotus Sect caused trouble, that I found a woman called Qin Xian'er among their ranks. Then I knew that she was my Nishang." Tears streamed down the Emperor's face, but his expression was one of resilience. Despite his outward strength, he looked so solitary and desolate. He no longer resembled the ruler of the vast Empire but an aging man approaching the end of his life.

Lin Wanrong looked on with a touch of sorrow. Despite the old man's many faults, his genuine care for Xian'er was undeniable. He sighed softly, asking in a low voice, "Old man, how did you determine that Xian'er is your daughter?"

"You may not know this. Xian'er's mother's surname is Qin. When I met her in Jiangnan, she had a maiden name, called Xianling! Qin Xianling, Qin Xian'er, considering her age and appearance, she is the spitting image of Consort Qin reincarnated. How could I, even in my confusion, fail to recognize my own daughter?" A faint smile surfaced on the old Emperor's withered face, as if he was reminiscing about the past.

Indeed, just by looking at the portrait, one could tell how similar the mother and daughter were. It was not difficult for the old Emperor to recognize his own daughter at first glance. However, since the old Emperor recognized Xian'er, why didn't he acknowledge her immediately, but instead waited for so long?

The old Emperor had a keen eye, and from his expression, it was clear what he was thinking. He couldn't help but sigh lightly, "I know what you're thinking. But at that time, Xian'er had a deep misunderstanding of me. If I had rashly acknowledged her, it would have caused her great resentment. I had already lost her once, and I absolutely could not lose her a second time. Moreover, she was in the White Lotus Sect. If her identity was exposed, coupled with her misunderstanding of me, it would certainly provide an opportunity for those with ulterior motives. Therefore, I never revealed Xian'er's identity to anyone, but secretly sent people to protect her. When you attacked Jinan City that day, putting Xian'er in the midst of thousands of cannons, I wished I could have beheaded you when the news came."

Lin Wanrong felt a chill run down his spine. After the great victory, he wondered why the Emperor didn't mention his merits at all. "Old man, you can't blame me for this. Blame that insidious Tong Cheng, who almost got me and Xian'er killed."

"So, after your subordinate Xu Zhen shot and killed Tong Cheng on the way, when Prince Cheng sent a letter to pursue the responsibility, I didn't mention a word." The Emperor snorted coldly, a thick murderous intent flashing in his eyes. His gaze fell on the scroll in Lin Wanrong's hand, and seeing the gentle and water-like appearance of Consort Qin, his eyes gradually softened. "After Consort Qin's death, I sealed her palace, and no one was allowed to step in. When I was picking up her relics, I accidentally found a letter."

"What does the letter say?" Lin Wanrong hurriedly asked, "Is it for Xian'er?"

"You're quite smart, but my Consort Qin is not bad either." The Emperor showed a bitter smile and sighed, "She was born in the water town of Jiangnan, originally a talented and beautiful woman. But trapped in the palace, her worries grew day by day. She loved me so much that she didn't hesitate to block the sword for me. She was worried that her actions would cause Xian'er to turn against me, so she left a letter to enlighten her. Who knew that Xian'er disappeared that night without even seeing the shadow of this letter. It wasn't until decades later that the letter fell into Xian'er's hands."

Lin Wanrong was silent for a while. It's better late than never. He believed that after Xian'er read her mother's letter, her hatred for the old Emperor would lessen. But whether she could forgive him was uncertain. "Old man, where is Xian'er now?" Lin Wanrong asked anxiously.

"Promise me one thing first, then I'll tell you," the old Emperor said solemnly.

"I agree, I agree to it all. Old man, please speak quickly," Lin Wanrong, thinking of Xian'er, spoke in an agitated rush.

"You must promise me that you will love and take care of Xian'er for the rest of your life. Can you do that?" The old Emperor, a glimmer of spirit flashing in his eyes, asked in an elevated voice.

"I can, I certainly can," he responded.

The Emperor smiled faintly, saying, "Very well. Then, you shall bow to Xian'er."

'Is the old man asking me to perform the ritual bow with Xian'er? Really, what's the rush? It wouldn't be late even if we wait until I find Xian'er!' Seeing the Emperor's eyes blazing like torches and his face full of determination, he could only hold onto Xian'er's portrait, slowly kneeling down.

The Emperor began, "I will say a phrase, and you will repeat it after me. I, Lin Wanrong, willingly — to form a union with Princess Nishang—"

"I, Lin Wanrong, willingly— to form a union with Princess Nishang—" Lin Wanrong obediently echoed.

The old Emperor's eyes flashed with a hint of severity as he softly added, "—to become brother and sister!"